

How to Save Public Broadcasting

A veteran public broadcasting executive prescribes a solution for the beleaguered enterprise.

By **Mary G.F. Bitterman**

Our public television service came into being in 1951, when Frieda Hennock persuaded her fellow FCC commissioners to reserve 209 television channels for educational use. Commercial television was already established — we are the only country in the world in which



The late Fred Rogers, longtime host of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

commercial broadcasting preceded public broadcasting. This put us at a certain disadvantage, but an array of bright, irrepressible people saw the great promise of public television and overcame many difficulties to launch it in communities across America. They started in Houston and East Lansing, then moved on to Pittsburgh, Madison, San Francisco, and in 1963 to Los Angeles. Prominent among these pioneers was James Leaders Loper, whose middle name portended the mark he would make.

Larry Grossman, who succeeded Hartford Gunn as president of PBS, remembers Jim as one of American public broadcasting's most astute programmers — a person who took a weak UHF station in Los Angeles and turned it into a significant player with great productions such as *Hollywood Television Theater* and *American Playhouse*. And that wasn't all. Legendary programs such as *The Advocates* (with WGBH), *The Belle of Amherst*, *Cosmos* (one of the most

watched series in the history of public broadcasting), and *Meeting of the Minds* with Steve Allen, who considered the series his proudest achievement, also were part of the Loper legacy.

New generations have followed in Jim's footsteps, continuing to produce programming of superior quality, both locally and nationally. Children's programming from *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, *Sesame Street* and *Reading Rainbow* has been augmented by new programs such as *Clifford*, *Arthur*, *Between the Lions*, *Maya and Miguel*, and *It's a Big, Big World*. Parents continue to appreciate the safe haven provided their children when watching public television. Teachers also are strong fans, using not only the television programs but the web content with curriculum guides, bibliographies, and educational games. Icon series, like *Nova*, *Great Performances*, *American Experience*, *Nature*, *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* and *Frontline* have been continually refreshed and are still recognized as America's truly great programs.

Special series from Bill Moyers, including *Death and Dying* and *Becoming American: The Chinese Experience* and from Ken Burns on the Civil War, baseball, and jazz along with Twin Cities Public Television's *The Forgetting: A Portrait of Alzheimer's* and *P.O.V.* and *Independent Lens*, which let fresh voices be heard, are programs that bring new relevance to the PBS lineup. PBS continues to win countless Emmys for its programs, and, more important, to earn the trust and confidence of the American people. Recent polls indicate that PBS is the most trusted national institution, more than the Congress,

the federal government, the courts, and the newspapers of the nation – truly, the “public trust” envisioned by the Second Carnegie Commission in its report of 1979.

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Public broadcasters have moved forward also with new technologies, more alert to the promise of those technologies than many of their commercial counterparts. They follow in the tradition of the pioneering public broadcasters who took UHF channels and breathed real life into them; who worked with teachers to provide for off-air recording of program material for use in classrooms across America; who developed captioning for the hearing-impaired. They have linked public television stations through satellite interconnection, putting land lines behind them before commercial stations did. They have utilized the Internet as an important and distinctive educational platform, developing one of the most widely used dot-org site in the world (pbs.org). They have moved forward faster than many commercial peers with the federally-mandated but largely federally-unfunded conversion from analog to digital systems that cost nearly \$2 billion, and developed the first full digital channel dedicated to HDTV presentations.

Public broadcasters see the enormous potential in digital technology and are currently participating in a project called the Digital Future Initiative (DFI), which

has been supported by the MacArthur Foundation and PBS and chaired by James Barksdale, former CEO of Netscape, and Reed Hundt, former Chairman of the FCC. If today's public broadcasters can successfully adapt to the realities of an ever more fragmented market and to audience expectations of programming on demand and on whatever platform or device it desires — *and* if adequate resources can be acquired — the DFI panel believes that the “potential for enhanced public service” in areas such as education, civic engagement and emergency preparedness “is vast.”

There are, however, some difficult challenges to be faced. Consider the problem of structure and governance. We have

169 public television licensees in the membership of PBS, operating 348 stations across the country. Each station, whether licensed to a community group, a university, a school board, or a state, is a sovereign entity, with its own Board of Directors, management, strategic plan, broadcast schedule, “culture,” and rate card for production and local underwriting. Each has developed distinctive partnerships within its community and has its own record of public service, along with its own history of successes and failures. America is known for its individualism, and public broadcasting is individualism writ large!

Nonetheless, in the wake of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, public television stations banded together to create PBS — the Public Broadcasting Service — so that they could accomplish together what they could not accomplish alone. PBS was created

to provide for the interconnection of stations, the distribution of programs, and other services to advance the members' interests, both local and national. PBS prepares a national program schedule through acquisition and the commissioning of new programs, mainly from a small number of member stations and selected independent producers, although there are other program suppliers, including APT and NETA. There is also a separate entity, called America's Public Television Stations (APTS), created in 1980, that is responsible for lobbying and representational efforts.

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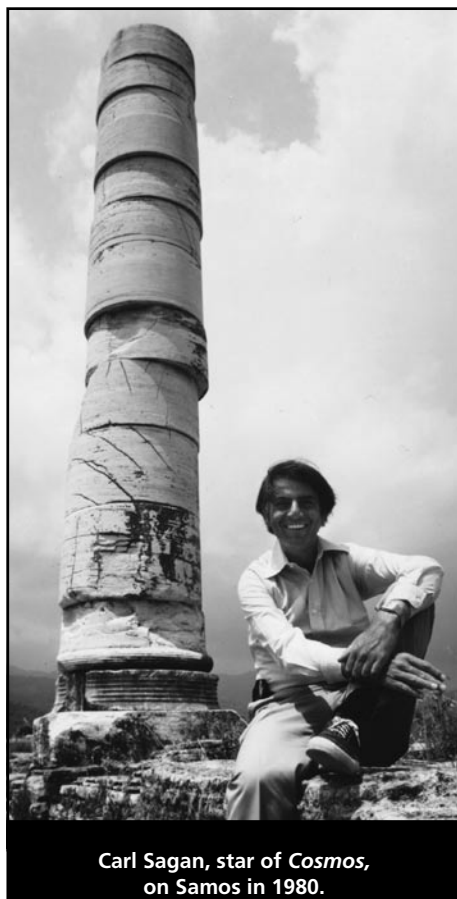
It is sometimes asked whether PBS is a media organization or a membership organization. Is its primary focus on objectives of its own or in furthering the objectives of the member stations? And does it further the objectives of one set of member stations over those of others? These questions must be addressed in order to relieve the persistent tension within the local/national partnership.

To appreciate the complexity of the organizational picture, consider also the affinity groups, as they are called, which have grown up largely around the four different types of licensee: state networks (20), universities (56), small stations, with licenses sometimes held by school boards or municipal authorities (6), and major markets, with licenses held by the communities (87). These affinity groups provide opportunities for same-licensee types to look at the world through a single lens

and to sharing of experience that may be both instructive and reassuring. There is also a group consisting of the non-primary stations in multiple-station markets — stations that are looking for ways to distinguish themselves from the primary stations. Within the public television community, there are more than 20 markets with overlapping stations, including Los Angeles and San Francisco, each of which has four PBS-member stations. Finally, there is an umbrella group known as the Affinity Group Coalition (AGC) that helps to coordinate the work of the discrete groups and that is considered by many as the most efficient and broadest-based mechanism for system consultation. Some people complain that the different licensee groups are often uncomfortable with the agendas and priorities of others, feeling that they have to be at every table to protect their respective interests, which makes representative democracy a less than popular form of governance. There is an old saying that American public television is really a series of meetings interrupted by an occasional program. When one looks at the calendar of public television sessions, the truth in humor is revealed.

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Proud of living in a democracy, we could say that there is nothing better than a multiplicity of voices and interest groups, but at some point there has to be focus on what is of shared importance and what will benefit the American people, and a clear sense of who speaks for whom and how we can



Carl Sagan, star of *Cosmos*, on Samos in 1980.

go about our business in an intelligent, economical, and responsible fashion. The existing multiplicity of organizations and voices blurs the image of public broadcasting both for audiences and for funders — whether they are individuals, foundations, corporations, State governments, or the U.S. Congress.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) was created by the Congress to serve as Grand Auditor and a political heat shield. (Bill Moyers and Arizona public television executive Jack Parris both complained about the past CPB Chairman's compromising of PBS's editorial integrity in the fall 2005 issue of *Television Quarterly*). A recent headline on its new Chairman

by no less an authoritative voice than the *Los Angeles Times* — “Public Broadcasting Meets the New Boss” — displays and promotes considerable confusion. Neither the Chairman of CPB nor CPB itself holds any broadcast license, operates any station, produces or distributes any programs. Public Broadcasting Boss? What about the leadership of the Public Broadcasting Service and National Public Radio? Some people would argue that there is no public broadcasting boss or chief

— or, put another way, that there are as many public broadcasting chiefs as there are organizations and stations dedicated to public broadcasting. Going forward, we need to exploit the great value of our local/national arrangements while organizing the public television system in a more efficient fashion that redounds to the greatest possible benefit of the communities it serves across America.

And now another substantial problem: From its tender start, American public broadcasting has never enjoyed steady, predictable, or sufficient funding. Funding deficiencies were clearly recognized in 1979 by the Second Carnegie Commission, which recommended the creation of a Public Telecommunications Trust and a Program Services Endowment — sound recommendations that were ignored. There is no media operation in the world funded in the Byzantine fashion of America’s public broadcasting system. Funds are acquired from Congress (representing about 14% of public broadcasting’s revenue, or \$1.30 per citizen), state and local authorities, universities, foundations, corporate underwriters, auction and sweepstakes

proceeds, and individual contributions, including those from members and major donors. Imagine what our public-service broadcasters could do if federal funding amounted to \$85 per capita as it does in Germany — or \$83 per capita in the United Kingdom, \$49 per capita in Japan, or even \$28 per capita in Canada or Australia.

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Every few years, regrettably, someone in Washington becomes upset with one program or another, or federal finances are in poor shape, and a march begins to defund public broadcasting. With the growing national deficit and the needs of the Gulf Coast, to say nothing of the war in Iraq, there are members of Congress wanting to end all future appropriations for public broadcasting and to use the money for hurricane relief and reconstruction projects, even as public broadcasters are being hailed for providing the most dependable community security networks in the affected areas. In fact, the federal investment in public broadcasting has brought an attractive return. Federal funds administered by CPB have been “matched” sixfold by annual investment from local sources — governmental, corporate and philanthropic (both foundation and individual).

This may be just the time when the “federal interest” in public broadcasting should be seen as a uniquely wise investment. A good case might even be made for a larger appropriation to permit public broadcasting to improve

and extend its services in the areas of education, civic engagement and cultural enrichment: To promote an early and sustained interest in learning aimed at reducing our more than 30% high-school dropout rate and to help the 50 million Americans over the age of 16 who are functionally illiterate and cannot even complete a job application form; to enhance responsible citizenship both domestically and in the larger world, to encourage voting and other forms of civic participation, and to provide inclusive mechanisms for engaging Americans in civic debate; to stimulate individual creativity, to introduce Americans to the power of the arts and to the uplifting of the human spirit, encouraging tolerance, if not respect, for that which is new, different, experimental.

Federal funds are now more important than ever in the public television financial mix. There has been a small increase (ca. 3%) in non-federal funding over the past 15 years, but much of it has been absorbed by digital conversion. State funding has been declining; corporate funding has not returned to the high mark reached in the year 2000; foundation funding, while strong, is limited; individual giving by members is not growing, and in some markets even decreasing, although there has been some sign of increase in major gifts.

While trying at least to maintain, if not to increase, federal contributions to public broadcasting, people throughout the industry are eager to engage the foundation and major donor communities in more meaningful ways. To that end, the PBS Board of Directors recently established the PBS Foundation, which provides “a

mechanism for seeking, cultivating, and receiving extraordinary gifts at the national level.” The Foundation will work collaboratively with member stations across the country to advance the agenda of public television, especially with regard to programming.

There is an element of truth in the complaint that some of our programming is stale – and that only babies and oldsters are interested in it. Lack of resources has tended to keep American public television in a condition of permanent adolescence. Our first concern is to find the funds that will make it possible to reach out to larger, younger, and more diverse audiences with content that is vital, fresh, and daring, that carries new voices, new ideas, and reflects new sensibilities. We need now to fund a wide array of producers whose content will make its way as easily on 60-inch plasma screens as on the Internet and palm-sized nanocasters.

In only a few months of operation, the PBS Foundation has received several important grants: one from the MacArthur Foundation to underwrite the work of the Digital Future Initiative; a five-year award from the Ford Foundation to support new digital projects and the PBS Foundation; and a matching grant from the Knight Foundation for support of “Public Square,” a digital service devoted to public affairs, local and national, and to civic participation.

We must reach out also to major donors who value education, culture, and citizenship, and who recognize how important it is in a democracy to have a strong, fearless, and fiercely independent public broadcasting system. Individual donors who have

the freedom and ability to commit to large projects might be encouraged to support new programs or to underwrite some existing programs of value, freeing station funds for the development of new content. Such contributions would become the donor's legacy to the nation.

It has now been nearly 40 years since the Public Broadcasting Act was signed, and much has been accomplished since then. We have in American public television a great and trusted institution — an institution whose “job description” and good works have led to its being called a “Public Trust” and the “People’s Business.” Over 80 million Americans avail themselves of its offerings on

a regular basis, in addition to the millions of students who benefit from its instructional programming and the community members whose lives are enhanced by its educational outreach activities. Our responsibility now is to build on those accomplishments. We must rationalize our governance, which will require some opening of minds and an infusion of trust in the relationships among colleagues in our multiplicity of public broadcasting organizations, and we must find significantly increased support for programming – programming that will enhance educational opportunity, civic engagement and human dignity for all Americans.

The chairman of PBS, Mary G. F. Bitterman is President of the Bernard Osher Foundation and formerly President of KQED, San Francisco and Director of the Hawaii Public Broadcasting Authority. This article is adapted from Dr. Bitterman's inaugural James L. Loper Lecture in Public Service Broadcasting, presented last November at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California.